CHAPTER 5

Coptic literature in the Byzantine and early Islamic world

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So far as one can tell from its fragmentary remains, Coptic literature was entirely religious in character and almost entirely Christian.[1] It emerges in the historical record of the Common Era from out of centuries of various types of experimentation – sporadic in character rather than organized and systematic – with how to represent the Egyptian language using the Greek alphabet, in particular with the aid of supplemental characters from Egypt's demotic writing system.[2] The oldest surviving manuscripts that are written in what is recognizable as the Coptic stage of Egyptian, and written according to more or less standardized, or at least systematic, norms of spelling, are perhaps as old as the third century AD.[3] The dating of such early Coptic manuscripts is hypothetical, being based almost entirely on typological criteria relating to handwriting and format (that is, palaeography and codicology), for which the main control at present is simply the analogous typology that has been worked out for the material remains of Greek literature, especially from Graeco-Roman and late antique Egypt.[4]

Students of the material remains of Coptic literature are inclined to assign the bulk of all the typologically earliest manuscripts to the fourth and fifth centuries. The Arab conquest of Egypt in the seventh century provides an approximate dividing point for the end of the first period of Coptic book production, after which the next large group of surviving manuscripts is dated, or assignable, to the ninth and later medieval centuries, into the twelfth. In the ninth century, dated colophons became relatively common

[1] 'Literature' is here narrowly defined, excluding documentary texts and subliterary genres (magic, medicine, pedagogy, etc.).

[2] See Quaegebeur 1982, 1991a, 1991b, and 1991c (also Quecke 1997); Kasser 1991a and 1991b; Satzinger 1991; Bagnall 2005.

[3] Only about half a dozen manuscripts and fragments are candidates for being assigned to so early a period. For a list, see Roberts 1979: 66–8, adding references to Kasser 1960, Diebner and Kasser 1989, and Goehring 1990. See further n. 25 below.

[4] The technical term for this method of dating is 'assign': a manuscript that is not explicitly 'dated' may be 'assigned' to a period of time on palaeographical or other such grounds.

in Coptic manuscripts, and by the end of the twelfth century Arabic had effectively replaced Coptic as the language of all Egypt. Materially, Coptic literature survives almost exclusively in codices,[5] made either of papyrus (typical of pre-conquest manuscripts), or parchment (typical of the earlier post-conquest manuscripts), or paper (typical of the later post-conquest manuscripts).

History has not been kind to Coptic literature, which is unfortunately noteworthy among the literatures of the Christian Orient for its extremely fragmentary and impoverished condition of survival. This condition is due in the first instance to the near-fatal blow to Coptic culture that the Arab conquest of Egypt turned out to be over the course of time. The Coptic language did not live on for very many centuries beyond that event, with the result that Coptic literature survived less by design than by pure chance, owing to the dry climate of Egypt south of the Nile Delta. In addition, the increasingly difficult circumstances of the Copts after the seventh-century conquest meant that much even of what has survived of Coptic literature has come down to us filtered through cultural circumstances that may well have altered, perhaps only to varying extents, but nonetheless in definitive ways, the character of that literature: nearly everything written in Coptic was finally subordinated to the needs of the Egyptian churches and monasteries, which by the tenth century were effectively the only bastions of Coptic (Christian) culture in what had become an Arabic-speaking and largely Islamic land. Not one single ancient Coptic manuscript is known that can be situated in Alexandria, the one city in Egypt in which we can trace a lively intellectual culture even well beyond the Arab conquest.[6] And to make matters yet more difficult, significant portions of what little did survive from elsewhere in Egypt were dispersed in the modern period, especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so that now fragments of individual codices, sometimes even torn pieces of individual leaves, are to be found scattered across numerous libraries and museums in Egypt, Europe, North America, and elsewhere.

For these reasons, it is very difficult to present Coptic literature in a way that does not risk somehow falsifying its historical development, either by remaining too dependent on the present condition of the surviving evidence, or by relying too much on hypothesis or speculation in order to become independent of this condition. There is still much basic research waiting to be done, including reconstructing dismembered codices and

[5] Very few Coptic book rolls are known. See further Emmel 1998.
[6] Cf. Müller 1954: 269.

identifying and editing the texts contained in them, quite apart from pursuing questions of textual criticism and the higher levels of literary criticism, including translation, all of which must be presupposed by any adequate literary history. It was observed thirty years ago that 'studies in [C]optic literature are no further advanced today than classical philology was in the fifteenth century',[7] and, despite significant progress in many areas in the intervening decades, the situation is not yet much different.

Tito Orlandi, author of the statement just quoted, is the only scholar in recent years who has ventured to offer anything like a 'history of Coptic literature', having published a series of summaries of the general results of his investigations throughout the closing three decades of the last century.[8] On many points in Orlandi's historical reconstruction there is common agreement. But given the state of research in Coptic literature, no one should be surprised if the history sketched out by him has to be changed in a variety of ways as research progresses. On the whole, his work must be approached as a set of intertwining hypotheses waiting to be tested by other scholars by means of their own detailed case studies.

One critic of this reconstruction, Enzo Lucchesi, has taken particular issue with Orlandi's characterization of Coptic literature during its formative period as basically simple and without intellectual sophistication. Orlandi's view is dependent on his explanation for the existence of many pre-conquest translations of Greek Patristic authors that were transmitted in Coptic with false attributions, where one famous name has merely been replaced with another, without there being any clearly discernible motive for doing so.[9] His explanation is to suggest 'that during this period [the later fourth and earlier fifth centuries] the Copts chose texts for translation without considering the name of the author very seriously. It is even possible that in the beginning texts circulated anonymously, only to have an author assigned to them later on', or that there were mistaken attributions already in the Greek manuscripts from which the translations were made. In Orlandi's view, the effective anonymity of much of this corpus of translations reflects the basic motivation for producing the translations in the first place: 'The material selected for translation seems to have been

[7] Orlandi 1978: 143.

[8] Especially Orlandi 1970: 57–158; 1978 (see 143–6 for references to earlier discussions of 'Coptic literature'); 1986 (note esp. 52); 1990; 1991b (with 1991a and many related articles in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*); 1995; 1997; 1998. Orlandi's most recent results appear on the website of his project 'Corpus dei Manoscritti Copti Letterari' (see http://rmcisadu.let.uniroma1.it/~cmcl). Consult also Krause 1979 and Coquin 1993.

[9] Such false attributions are to be distinguished from purposeful post-conquest pseudepigraphy: see Orlandi 1991b: 1456–8.

chosen chiefly according to the requirements of a special section of Egyptian society, the monastic groups', or simply in accordance with 'whatever the "normal" market was offering, a market geared more for popular consumption than for the demands of an "official" level. Accordingly, the needs of pleasing simply educated people were also considered.' This 'peculiar choice of material' shows that 'the Coptic preference was rather for the minor production of [the church fathers of the time] such as individual [h]omilies preserved in Greek (if at all) in secondary collections'. 'In vain we look for basic texts such as the Armenian translation of Irenaeus, or the Syriac translation of the works of Severus of Antioch, not to mention the most important homiletical, theological, and historical works of the church fathers of the time' ('like Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, even Athanasius').[10]

Lucchesi has criticized Orlandi's explanation as perpetuating a prejudiced and outdated view of the ancient Copts.[11] In reply, he and others have pointed out evidence for Coptic translations of dogmatic and philosophical Patristic works, even of 'corpora' of such works, whose existence would seem to contradict Orlandi's general characterization of classical Coptic translation literature.[12] Lucchesi's conclusion from this discrepancy in points of view is to 'recommend a prudent reserve particularly when it comes to making judgements of general import regarding the essence of Coptic literature, still today unfortunately too little or too poorly known, despite all that can be said about it', reminding us that it is all too easy to forget how much damage has been wrought by the 'vicissitudes of fortune'.[13]

Of course it may never be possible for us to reconstruct even the general shape of Coptic literature before the period from which the vast majority of our manuscripts comes (which is at least several centuries after the Arab conquest), but we will be able to do the best we can only after we have the most extensive collection of data possible. And in this respect, one desideratum stands out above all others, namely the reconstruction and publication of the widely scattered remains of the largest Coptic library yet known, the library of the so-called 'White Monastery' of Shenoute, which is our richest source by far for works of classical Coptic literature.[14] But here too we face the problem of the relatively late dates of the surviving manuscripts. For the bulk of the White Monastery codices (all of them parchment, except

[10] Orlandi 1991b: 1453–4; 1978: 151–4; 1986: 71–2; 1998: 135–6.
[11] Recently, see especially Lucchesi 2004.
[12] Lucchesi and Devos 1981; Coquin and Lucchesi 1981; Lucchesi 1981; 1998; 2004; 2005.
[13] Lucchesi 1981: 95 n. 2.
[14] For a recent summary of the history of this task, with special reference to the works of Shenoute, see Emmel 2004b: I.18–28; see also Orlandi 2002.

perhaps for a few scraps of paper) either are dated in the tenth, eleventh, or twelfth centuries, or else are assignable to the same period; a few are perhaps assignable to earlier centuries, but very few give a firm impression of being pre-conquest. Given that we have much the same problem with most of our other main sources of Coptic manuscripts, it might be useful to have a detailed survey of what is known of Coptic literature only from manuscripts that are datable or assignable with reasonable certainty to the third through seventh centuries.[15] Such a survey does not yet exist (and has not been undertaken here). But in any case, even though its result might have the advantage of methodological rigour, surely it would present only a part of the whole story. Students of Coptic literature are still searching for methods – as well as for more materials – that can help them to write something more likely to approximate the whole story.

COPTIC LITERATURE IN GENERAL

Coptic literature knows only one truly remarkable individual author, a late antique monastic leader named Shenoute (347–465). But another remarkable component of Coptic literature is translations of primary Manichaean and 'gnostic' literature,[16] and Coptic is also noteworthy for preserving a significant number of apocryphal biblical (especially New Testament) works – many of them gnostic in character – that would otherwise be completely or largely unknown. Discoveries of Coptic translations of works like the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Epistula Apostolorum*, the *Gospel of Mary*, the so-called *Gospel of the Saviour*, and the recently recovered *Gospel of Judas* continue to enrich our knowledge of early Christianity in its spread and evolution all around the Mediterranean.[17]

The rest of Coptic literature can be described as including – apart from the Christian Bible, which is ubiquitous – a large body of Christian hagiographical literature (lives of saints, including martyrs, monks, and bishops, in various genres, often mixed, including biography, passion, miracle,

[15] Forerunners of such an undertaking are W. E. Crum's chapter ('Literature') in Winlock, Crum, and Evelyn White 1926: I.196–208, and Kahle 1954: I.269–74, giving a list (now needing some revision) of Coptic manuscripts thought to be earlier than the sixth century.

[16] The term 'gnostic' is used here in a broad and historically imprecise way (in contrast to the usage advocated by Layton 1995; cf. Emmel 2002). The relevant bibliography is vast (cf. Krause 1979: 707–10, adding a reference to Scholer 1997); as convenient starting points, consult Layton 1987 for gnostic literature, and Gardner and Lieu 2004 for Manichaean literature.

[17] Consult Krause 1979: 697–707; Coquin 1993: 190 and 197–200; Schneemelcher 1991–2; Elliott 1993; Bovon et al. 1997–2005; Schneemelcher 1990–7; for the *Gospel of the Saviour*, see Emmel 2003 and 2005b; the *Gospel of Judas* is to be published by R. Kasser and G. Wurst.

encomium, sermon, and romance),[18] which overlaps with an equally large body of edifying and moralistic sermons (which may take the form of an encomium, or an exegesis of a biblical passage, and so on),[19] which overlaps in turn with another large corpus, namely liturgical texts in a stricter sense (some of which, of course, cannot necessarily be regarded as 'literature' narrowly defined). Less numerous are works that may be classified as treatises or literary epistles, and seemingly rare and uncommon are works with historical intentions. Of the latter, the only noteworthy survivals are the work known as the *Coptic Church History* (which, however, has much in common with the hagiographical literature)[20] and John of Nikiou's *Chronicle of World History* (which survives only in an Ethiopic translation made from an Arabic translation).[21] While some religious poetry is known apart from hymns and other specifically liturgical compositions,[22] novels or anything vaguely resembling secular literature are effectively non-existent (although the hagiographical literature sometimes makes extensive and clever use of novelistic style); the only two works worth mentioning in this regard are the so-called *Alexander Romance* and *Cambyses Romance*.[23]

THE BASES OF COPTIC LITERATURE: THE COPTIC BIBLE AND SHENOUTE

Whereas the earliest attempts to write Egyptian using the Greek alphabet supplemented by Egyptian demotic characters (I mean both the so-called 'Old Coptic' and 'Pre-Coptic' texts[24]) do not show any significant signs of influence from Greek literature as such, attesting only some degree of fundamental literacy in Greek, the earliest examples of the Coptic writing system proper (which can be seen as early products of a concerted, if not necessarily fully organized, effort to *standardize* something akin to the surviving Old Coptic and Pre-Coptic experimentations) are mostly translations from the Greek Bible, that is, from the Septuagint and the New Testament. Apart from biblical books (mostly from the Old Testament, and including 2 Macc. 5:27–7:41 as an excerpt headed 'The Martyrs of the Jews Who Lived under Antiochus the King'), these very early Coptic texts include only Melito of

[18] For a convenient sample of this literature, with English translations, see Reymond and Barns 1973; Depuydt 1993.
[19] For a convenient sample, see Depuydt 1991.
[20] For the texts, see Orlandi 1968–70; Johnson 1976; Orlandi 1985.
[21] Zotenberg 1883 (cf. Zotenberg 1877–9); Charles 1916.
[22] See Kuhn 1991; Krause 1979: 717; Coquin 1993: 212.
[23] See Müller 1991; Krause 1979: 716–17; Coquin 1993: 196.
[24] See the references in n. 2 above.

Sardis *On the Passover* and an unidentified homiletic (?) work.[25] This fact alone warrants the hypothesis that it was the Christian church in Egypt that undertook to standardize and promote the Coptic writing system, and there is an inherent historical logic to the assumption that the church did so in the interest of missionization beyond the limits of the Greek-speaking cities of Egypt. However, such a reconstruction is perhaps most convincing if it is placed only after the end of the Great Persecution in Egypt (313), or even after the triumph of Constantine (324), the Council of Nicaea (325), and the accession of Athanasius as bishop of Alexandria (328).[26] But by that time there was another major religious missionary movement underway in the Roman empire, equally interested in making translations of sacred texts into local languages, namely the Manichaeans. And in fact some of the most remarkable early Coptic codices (made of papyrus and assignable to the fourth or fifth century) are products of a Manichaean community in Upper Egypt,[27] while recent excavations in Dakhla Oasis have turned up evidence for Manichaean translation activity from Syriac into Coptic in a town there in the fourth century.[28]

It is no surprise that an illiterate language (such as Egyptian was just prior to the Byzantine period) received its first major push into literacy from a carefully crafted translation, which could then serve as an inspiration and a standard for subsequent writers or translators. Even if the Coptic version of the Bible could be shown to have been produced in competition with slightly earlier translation and publication projects by Manichaeans (or even gnostics of some sort), this would not alter the fact that it was the Christian Bible that became the enduring foundational monument of Coptic literature, just as it was eventually the Christian church, and especially its monasteries, in whose care Coptic literature flourished and survived to the extent that it did. And it was a late antique Coptic monastic leader named Shenoute whose prophetic inspiration and talent for eloquence, both of them nourished by a thorough knowledge of the Coptic Bible, led to the creation of the only other truly outstanding literary achievement in Coptic.

[25] For the latter, Goehring 1990: 1–79 and 261–76 respectively. See further Orlandi 1978: 146–51; 1986: 53–5; 1998: 120–1; cf. n. 3 above.

[26] Cf. Roberts 1979: 64 n. 4, referring to G. Mink.

[27] But discovered in the Fayyum Oasis; see, for example, Richter 2005.

[28] See, for example, Gardner 1997. A similar hypothesis that it was gnostics, or some 'gnosticizing' group, who created the first standardized Coptic writing system to undertake a programme of translation is more fraught with difficulties than the two other possibilities, but still worth mentioning (cf. Roberts 1979: 63–72, a not entirely satisfactory discussion, but useful and provocative; Orlandi 1986: 55–7).

If even only a certain portion of the roughly one hundred surviving manuscripts of Shenoute's works had survived completely, we would have a corpus of nearly 200 works, the bulk of them transmitted in two organized sets of nine and eight volumes, respectively his *Canons* and his *Discourses* (or *Logoi*). As it is, we have extensive fragments of this remarkable corpus, but relatively few works are known that have survived completely from beginning to end, and only about half of what survives has yet been published, relatively little of it in a satisfactory fashion. Still less has been translated accurately into any modern language. However, recent work on Shenoute's corpus has already succeeded in making him much more accessible and better known than he was even a decade ago, and the upcoming generation of scholars is already able to make use of his works in ways that were scarcely imaginable a century ago.

Shenoute produced his corpus of writings across a period of about eighty years, beginning not too long before he became, probably around 385, the head of his monastery at the edge of the western desert across the Nile from Panopolis (modern Akhmim), and continuing to within a decade of his death in 465. His earliest works, two long open letters addressed to his community in the midst of a crisis that challenged the spiritual leadership of the then head, already displayed Shenoute's literary consciousness.[29] Sometime after succeeding his disgraced predecessor, Shenoute himself combined these two letters in a single volume that was to be read by or to all members of the community four times each year. This volume thus became the first in what eventually grew to be a set of nine volumes (the *Canons*) that Shenoute himself compiled across the many years of his long tenure as head of the monastery. The works in these volumes combine with the many other works of Shenoute – especially sermons of varying lengths, several open letters to residents of Panopolis, and perhaps some treatises or tracts – to form a corpus that one can well imagine Shenoute himself having thought of as a kind of Coptic counterpart to similar corpora that he might have known and admired in Greek, such as the works of Athanasius or the Cappadocian fathers, for example.

I do mean to say 'in Greek', for there is no good reason to doubt that Shenoute was capable of both reading and speaking Greek, and therefore also of writing it with at least some facility. In fact, the question of the extent to which Shenoute not only knew Greek, but had also been trained in it, is important for understanding and evaluating his literary achievement. Not

[29] See further Emmel 2004a. For a brief overview of Shenoute, see Emmel 2005a.

that there is any serious doubt about his fundamental 'Copticity',[30] but the question of the sources of his inspiration and of his rhetorical skills depends heavily on what we imagine him as having read, especially during his youth. Certainly he read and studied the Coptic Bible, and it seems that he also knew the Greek Bible well, but what else? And what did Shenoute read *in Coptic* during his formative years? Suffice it here to suggest that knowledge of the Coptic Bible (deeply, in fact fundamentalistically, revered as inspired and authoritative) plus probably both rhetorical and notarial training in Greek (and in Coptic, such as it may have been in the middle of the fourth century) seems in the case of Shenoute to have combined with inherent genius to produce an extraordinary personage gifted with eloquence in a language that up until then had hardly any original (i.e. not translated) literary tradition to speak of. The only names to be mentioned here as authors of original Coptic literature prior to Shenoute are Pachomius, perhaps also St Antony (if he did not write his letters in Greek) and Paul of Tamma,[31] and still more doubtfully the poorly attested Hieracas.[32] In Orlandi's opinion, these 'first manifestations of original Coptic literature involved a rejection of "literature" as such', and Shenoute's 'style . . . has no Coptic precedent'.[33] Indeed, one should 'appreciate the enormous effort that it must have required to raise the Coptic language – which up until then, so far as we know, had been used only [*sic*] for translation – to the level of a completely independent, literary language'.[34]

Some day there will be interesting studies of the variety of Shenoute's rhetorical devices and of his playfulness with language (even if he normally played only with a grim purpose). Something of the special character of Shenoute's language is due to his way of mixing formal rhetoric and biblical quotations and reminiscences with what seem to be everyday colloquialisms and lower-register informality. It is becoming increasingly clear that this 'style' of Shenoute's is to be accounted for, at least in part, by his works being written records of spoken language: it is a reasonable hypothesis that Shenoute dictated most, perhaps even all, of his correspondence (whether addressed to individuals or to communities, including even his own), and that his sermons were taken down by stenographers while he spoke extemporaneously. Since Shenoute lived as a hermit, some distance

[30] Although the well-documented fact that modern scholars have sometimes wrongly attributed to Shenoute Coptic works that can be shown to be translations from Greek has led especially Lucchesi to raise questions that challenge the basic feasibility of distinguishing neatly between Coptic translation literature and original Coptic literature. See n. 65 below.

[31] On whom see Orlandi 1988 and Lucchesi 1995.

[32] See further Krause 1979: 710–2; Coquin 1993: 200–1; Orlandi 1986: 60–4 and 1998: 129–31.

[33] Orlandi 1986: 63 and 69. [34] Orlandi 1998: 134.

removed from his monastery, and communicated with the residents of his community by means of letters, he expected these letters to be read aloud to assembled monks (both at the time they were delivered, and on suitable later occasions), be they male (as in the main monastery and in the smaller Monastery of Pshoi 3 km to the northwest) or female (as in the third member monastery, located in a village to the south called Atripe).[35] Unlike these letters, at least a selection of which Shenoute himself compiled in the nine volumes of his *Canons*, probably we owe the written transmission of a selection of his sermons (mainly in the eight volumes of his *Discourses*, but also apart from this organized corpus) to their being used by subsequent generations of monks in Shenoute's monastery for liturgical reading during worship services.[36]

COPTIC TRANSLATION LITERATURE

Given the remarkable nature of Shenoute's literary achievement, and the force of his personality, it is possible that much or even all of the *translation* work that was undertaken between the end of the fourth century and the Arab conquest was done under Shenoute's direction or inspiration.[37] Some of this Coptic translation literature is of great value either for things it preserves that we might have had in Greek or some other language, but we do not (for example, parts of the corpus of Athanasius' Festal Letters,[38] or the unique Coptic apocryphal literature), or for its text- and literary-critical value.[39] Furthermore, there are works, or fragments of works, preserved in Coptic that are thought to be translations (presumably, and most probably, from Greek), but which remain thus far unidentified and therefore might eventually contribute to our knowledge of the corpora of Patristic authors (for example, the so-called 'Berlin Coptic Book'[40]).

Some Coptologists of the current generation are inclined to work against a view of Coptic literature as primarily an ancillary resource for New Testament and Patristic scholarship (a view according to which the Greek

[35] On the tripartite division of Shenoute's 'monastic federation', see Layton 2002; on the women's monastery, see Krawiec 2002 (cf. Behlmer 2004).

[36] On the bibliographical structure of Shenoute's transmitted corpus, and for a survey of its contents, see Emmel 2004b.

[37] This hypothesis was suggested by J. Leipoldt a century ago (1909: 154) and has been accepted by Orlandi (1986: 70 at n. 63; 1991b: 1453*b*; 1998: 135) despite his awareness that 'there is no direct evidence for this [claim]' (2002: 211 with n. 7).

[38] See, for example, Camplani 1989.

[39] See, for example, Lucchesi 1981.

[40] Schenke Robinson 2004.

Vorlage, even if hypothetical, is always the primary object of interest), preferring instead to emphasize that even translation literature can and should be understood in its Coptic cultural context. In other words, the interest of a piece of Coptic translation literature should not end once its Greek *Vorlage* has been identified. Rather, one must still ask when, where, and why it was translated, and how and why it was altered during its transmission.

Indeed, with regard to a literature such as the one being presented here, there is no compelling reason to exclude translations from consideration, as we might do in the case of modern literatures, generally speaking. In fact, there are good reasons to include translation literature within our purview, methodologically because often we cannot distinguish with certainty between translation literature and original Coptic literature, and also fundamentally because it is likely that the majority of Coptic speakers made no such distinction. Translated literature was for them, so far as we can tell, as much a part of 'Coptic literature' as was original literature, even if they knew (or merely thought they knew, misled by pseudepigraphy or misattribution) that the author of a given work was a non-Egyptian or a non-Coptic speaker. It is not certain that native Coptic speakers could distinguish between original and translated literature any more easily than we can, and quite probably they were much less motivated even to try.

Such considerations raise the further question of what difference it makes to us whether a given work of Coptic literature is a translation or not. Of course the phenomenon of translation is interesting in and of itself, and certainly there are various respects in which this distinction is, or might be, of critical importance in specific cases. But on the whole, and especially in the present context, the main interest of the distinction is the resulting search for undeniably *Coptic* literature in the sense that it was created by native speakers of Coptic, whose experience and view of the world was thus shaped by that language and its culture. This is the literature that we should regard as most essentially 'Coptic', and this is the literature that might eventually – if Coptic culture had not been transformed and stunted first by military and political conquest and later by religious and linguistic repression – have produced the kind of self-reflective and insightfully enriching corpora that one expects from a well-developed literate culture nurtured by a long tradition of intelligent and sensitive native speakers who undertake to express or reflect their experience of life and the world in written form, intending their writing to be shared with a wide public.

SEARCHING FOR ORIGINAL COPTIC LITERATURE: SHENOUTE'S SUCCESSORS

The oral aspect of Shenoute's corpus, discernible both in its creation and in the main purpose of its transmission (as already discussed), underscores an omnipresent characteristic of Coptic literature as a whole: the vast bulk of it, so far as we yet know it, was composed either for, or in the act of, public declamation in the context of Christian worship. In so far as it was transmitted, it was transmitted as 'living (liturgical) literature',[41] which could be altered in the course of transmission to suit new times, places, and needs. This characteristic can be demonstrated almost whenever we have multiple copies of a work, in that each copy will likely show more or less significant and sometimes far-reaching variants over against any other copies.[42] In this literature – mostly hagiographic and homiletic – it is not easy to discern individual authorial voices, perhaps both because of editing in the course of transmission and because the genres themselves tended to be treated as formalized to the point of excluding idiosyncracy.

An example is Shenoute's successors and imitators, who had to compose (whether by dictation or otherwise) sermons and letters in the large and dark shadow of the great latter-day prophet: Besa,[43] Shenoute's immediate successor, is mostly quite bland in comparison with his master, and heavily dependent on quoting from the Bible; John the archimandrite[44] is – a few extraordinary passages notwithstanding – repetitive in his imitation of Shenoute's hortatory mode; the author (?) known as 'Pseudo-Shenoute'[45] seems at times almost to have worked from texts of Shenoute using scissors and paste (but selecting only rather trite passages to copy). One can

[41] I borrow this expression from Bradshaw 2002, which I know only from Lubomierski 2005: 179–81.

[42] The only salient exceptions to this rule are the Bible and Shenoute's works (although both of these corpora also show signs of editing in the course of transmission). Of course there are other causes of manuscript variants as well, and Coptic was not the only language with a tradition of 'living literature' (on this phenomenon in Greek, see Müller 1954: 269 n. 77, citing A. Erhard).

[43] See the nearly complete edition of what survives of Besa's letters and sermons by Kuhn 1956 (this edition includes some fragments of Shenoute's works: see Emmel 2004b: II.937–8, cf. 559 and 566) and 1984. I do not believe that Besa was the author of the so-called 'Life of Shenoute' (see Keil 1978: 40–1; and several forthcoming publications by N. Lubomierski, including her 2005 Berlin Th.D. dissertation).

[44] His 'Canon' has not yet been published (apart from a few fragments), nor has he yet been clearly delineated as a distinct author: see the discussions in *P.Ryl.Copt.* 65 and *P.Lond.Copt.* 85, and also Emmel 2004b: I.91–2 and II.887–98 *passim* (showing how often fragments of this author's work have been attributed mistakenly by modern scholars to Shenoute). The work discussed by Horn 1986, §§2–4, as a work of Shenoute (see pp. 15–16), belongs to John's corpus.

[45] Ed. Kuhn 1960 (see *CSCO* 206: v–vi, for Kuhn's characterization of the author and his work; cf. Shisha-Halevy 1975: 151 n. 13, who hypothesized 'that "Pseudo-Shenoute" represents a stratifiable mixture of distinct Shenoutian and extraneous elements, rather than a homogeneous non-Shenoutian text simply and falsely attributed to Shenoute').

praise these authors for a certain 'mastery of the Coptic language',[46] which in Orlandi's opinion was not achieved again until the time of Damianus, bishop of Alexandria from the last quarter of the sixth century until 605. Around that time, a group of authors displays 'a language . . . which has at last become independent of the Greek model and self-sufficient in its syntactical and stylistic elements', a style of which Shenoute 'is to be understood as a precursor'.[47] These authors, so far as they are known to us from the few of their works that survive, are the following:[48]

Pisentius of Koptos (569–632), from whom we have an encomium *On Onnophrios* and the beginning of another sermon (*P.Lond.Copt.* II 167.1, a fragment of a papyrus codex probably from the seventh century[49]), as well as an archive of his ephemeral correspondence.

Constantine of Siout (*c.* 550–640): two encomia *On Athanasius*; two *On Claudius*, the martyr; and one *On George*, the martyr; an encomium *On Shenoute* is known unfortunately only by title.

Rufus of Shotep (*c.* 600): a series of sermons (in the form of exegetical commentaries) *On the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*.

John of Shmun (*c.* 600): an encomium *On Antony* and one *On Mark*, the evangelist.

John of Parallos (*c.* 600): a sermon (*logos*) *On the Archangel Michael and on Heretical Books*.[50]

These names stand out mainly because they can be viewed as a kind of group to which attention is drawn in the Arabic church historical source known as the 'History of the Patriarchs (of Alexandria)'.[51] But even if we take the latter as proof that these men really did exist, here too the question of the authenticity of the attributions in our manuscripts can be taken as still open. Given the amount of pseudepigraphy and misattribution that we know of in our manuscripts, why should we trust the attributions of works to these particular names? In fact, the attribution to a Coptic bishop *c.* 600 of such typically 'Alexandrian' (even 'Origenist') exegetical sermons as those that have been transmitted under the name of Rufus of Shotep has been challenged by Enzo Lucchesi and Philippe Luisier,[52] both of whom

[46] Orlandi 1986: 70, referring to Besa.

[47] Orlandi 1986: 75–7 (the quotation is from 76); 1970: 97–106; 1991b: 1455–6; 1998: 144–5; 1997: 113–20. See also Krause 1979: 713–14; Coquin 1993: 202–3. Bishop Damianus himself does not belong to this group of authors, for Coptic was not his native language, and he composed in Greek and perhaps also Syriac (Orlandi 1991b: 1455*b*).

[48] References to editions and translations (also to other minor or little-known works of these authors) can be found in the publications of Orlandi, Krause, and Coquin listed in n. 8 above.

[49] Winlock, Crum, and Evelyn White 1926: I.204 with n. 1.

[50] Cf. Müller 1954: 244–5.

[51] Evetts 1904–15: 213 (*PO* 1.4: 477); cf. Garitte 1950: 297–8.

[52] Lucchesi 2000 and 2002; Luisier 1998; for a reply, see Sheridan 2003.

prefer to see in these sermons translations of works that were written in Greek in the late fourth or early fifth century. On the other hand, there exist more works attributed to men who lived before the Arab conquest and who very likely preached in Coptic rather than Greek that might deserve to be considered as original Coptic literature: for example, Makarios of Tkow (d. 451), from whom we have a sermon *On Michael*, the archangel[53]; Isaac of Antinoopolis (dates unknown), from whom we have an encomium *On Colluthus*[54]; or Phoibammon of Shmin (dates unknown), from whom also we have an encomium *On Colluthus*, with an indication that it was his second in honour of that martyr.[55]

From the time of the Arab conquest itself and shortly after, we have a few works, or fragments of works, of presumably original Coptic literature from the following authors:[56]

Benjamin, bishop of Alexandria (626–65), from whom we have a sermon *On the Marriage at Cana* and two fragments concerning Shenoute.[57]

Agathon (Benjamin's successor, 665–81): a fragment of a sermon, the attribution of which is hypothetical.[58]

John III (Agathon's successor, 681–9): an encomium *On Menas*, the martyr; and two dialogues (in which John appears as one of the interlocutors), one known as the *Questions of Theodore*, the other as the *Controversy of John III*, although it is not clear to me that these two dialogues should be considered as works of John rather than as anonymous works about him.[59]

John of Nikiou (end of the seventh century): although it survives only in an Ethiopic version translated from Arabic, John's *Chronicle of World History* was likely composed originally in Coptic,[60] and it deserves mention here as a unique specimen of this genre in this language.[61]

Menas of Nikiou (John's successor, early eighth century): an encomium *On Macrobius*, the bishop and martyr; and a *Life of Isaac*, patriarch of Alexandria.

[53] Lafontaine 1979.

[54] Ed. S. E. Thompson in Depuydt 1993: I.46–83 and II.37–64; cf. Emmel and South 1996.

[55] Till 1935–6: I.168–81. On the uncertainty of the dates of the last two authors named, see Timm 1984–92: I.113 and n. 9 on p. 125.

[56] Orlandi 1986: 77–8; 1991b: 1456; 1998: 146 (I omit Isaac of Qalamūn because he 'can be dated approximately to the first half of the ninth century' (Coquin 1991; cf. Coquin 1993: 204), which is well beyond the limits set for this volume). See also Krause 1979: 715–16; Coquin 1993: 203–4. For the dates of the Alexandrian patriarchs from 500 to 700, I follow Jülicher 1922.

[57] Cf. Müller 1954: 232–5.

[58] See Müller 1959: 334–6.

[59] Note the comment by Graf 1944–53: I.479.

[60] Altheim and Stiehl 1971–3: I.356 with n. 1; P. M. Fraser in *Coptic Encyclopedia* v: 1366–7.

[61] See n. 21 above.

Zacharias of Xois (also early eighth century): two sermons, one of them *On the Lord's Coming to Jerusalem as a Boy*, the other *On Repentence*[62]; and an encomium (*bios*) *On John Kolobos*.[63]

The problem in the realm of original Coptic literature is immediately apparent: from none of these authors do we have anything like a corpus that suffices to allow us to get to know them as individual personalities, as we can get to know Shenoute. For us, they remain shadows or at best fleeting images, faint beacons proclaiming the existence of a literature that has been all but lost. It even seems that there is not yet enough evidence to disprove with complete conviction what Lucchesi has proposed as 'the golden rule with regard to translations of sacred texts in the Nile valley and on the horn of Africa', namely that 'every Ethiopic translation is based, in principle, on an Arabic model, just as every Egyptian Arabic translation presupposes, in the absence of proof to the contrary, an underlying Coptic text, which presupposes in turn a Greek original'.[64] Lucchesi has not shrunk from challenging even Shenoute's claim to being our original Coptic author par excellence.[65]

Nonetheless, students of Coptic literature *for its own sake* should continue the search for original Coptic literature that can inspire us with the same sense of respect and admiration that we have for Shenoute, even if we can hardly hope to find another Coptic corpus of comparable richness and interest. The process of searching, which consists above all in reconstructing the physical remains of Coptic literature and identifying the contents of the manuscripts, is an intellectual enterprise that is both demanding and rewarding, offering in and of itself a challenge to any scientifically inquiring mind.

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[62] See Müller 1954: 237–9.

[63] Hopfner (1918: 3 (see especially n. 1) and 33–7) argued that Zacharias merely translated a Greek text into Coptic.

[64] Lucchesi 1998: 114. A corollary of this rule is that translation literature in other Oriental and African languages, especially Arabic, Ethiopic, Syriac, and Old Nubian, must be taken into account in the reconstruction of Coptic literature (Lucchesi 2004: 297).

[65] Lucchesi 1988; for a reply, see Depuydt 1990.

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